

The Friendly Giant: KAAY, Little Rock, Arkansas

By Bud Stacey and the "Mighty1090 KAAY.blogspot.com Gang"

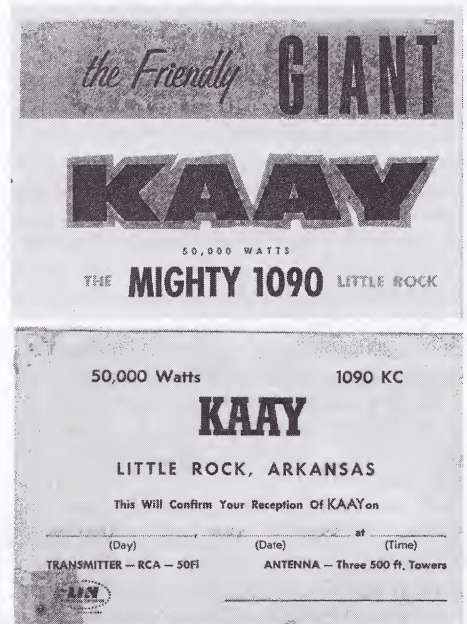
How many of us have tuned across the AM radio band in the evenings only to stop when something special caught our attention? Imagine hearing a station with limited and compressed audio playing Henry Mancini's "Baby Elephant Walk," a Top 40 hit in 1962, over and over again. With a booming voice, the announcer read names out of the Little Rock, Arkansas telephone directory; spots were aired which gave a hint of something even more exciting to come.

Wait a minute! This was 1090 kilocycles, where good old KTHS used to be. This station sounded as if it was local, but it couldn't be, because it occasionally faded and became distorted. It was Labor Day weekend, 1962, and we were invited to tune in again on Labor

Day morning to hear a big surprise. It was the big, new, brilliant sound of ten-ninety, KAAY!

One might wonder what was so special about KAAY. Many 50,000-watt stations claimed to be mighty, but this station was more than mighty. KAAY also claimed to be "The Friendly Giant" and indeed they were! This powerful, popular, and proud station was more than just exciting; it was fun. Many stations targeted just one primary audience, but "The Friendly Giant" had something for almost everyone. If a program seemed uninteresting, one could count on something to reach out and grab his or her attention during the next programming segment.

It wasn't just rock-n-roll. Most youngsters would typically switch frequencies when they heard the beginning of a newscast, but KAAY

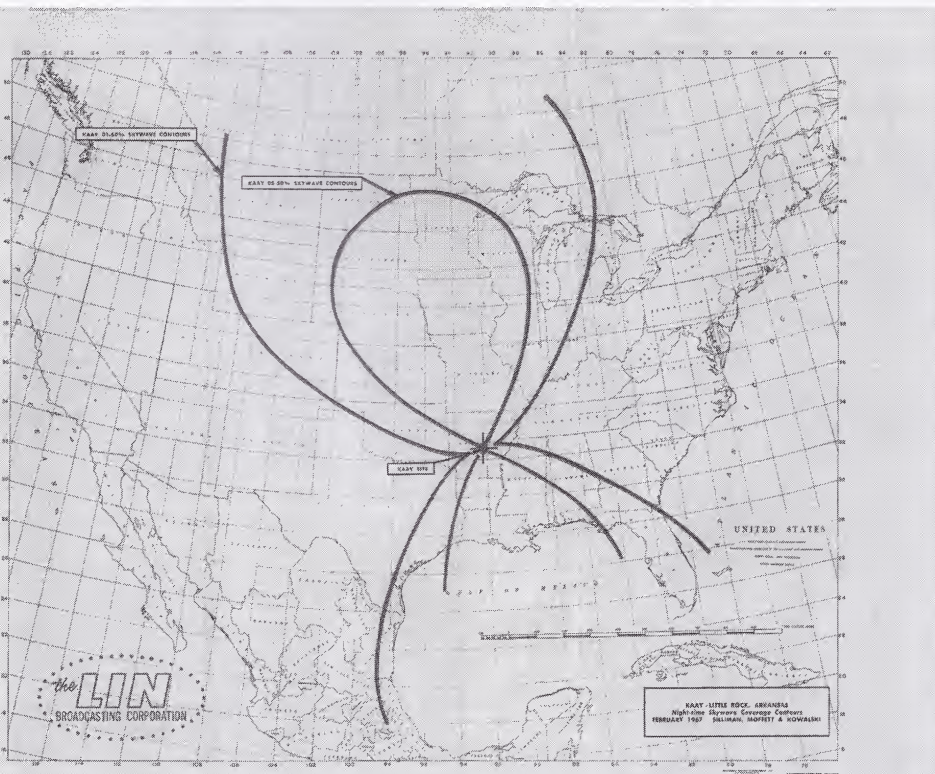


KAAY promotional card (above) and QSL card (below). (Courtesy Ron Henselman and Ken Reitz)

made them want to stay tuned. There was a block of religious programming during the evenings, and many of us didn't change frequencies, because we knew something exciting would be happening next. As a result, many of us actually learned something about life. So, how did this all begin?

KTHS to KAAY

KTHS came on the air in 1924 and originally stood for, "Kum To Hot Springs," where it was originally located. Fast forward to Little Rock on Labor Day weekend, 1962, with the DJs, newsmen and other staff reading the names from the phone directory over "Baby Elephant Walk." They did this in shifts, in the manner of, "This is (DJ's air name), and Big K would like to welcome Joe. K. Smith of 902 North Pine Street to The Friendly Giant!" Jim Hankins, a.k.a. Mike McCormick, had this idea. Along the way, "teasers" were interspersed in between the greetings to listeners who included a young Ron Henselman who remembers these teasers and stayed up really late listening to what would happen next. At 6 am Monday, September 3, 1962, KAAY officially took to the air.



The 50 kW, clear channel signal from the Mighty 1090 of the 60s and 70s was (and still is) huge and listeners responded. The station collected and catalogued listener responses over a six week period from January 27 through March 7, 1964 counting a total of 14,437 cards and letters that were received during that period from 40 states, 11 countries and one U.S. Naval vessel at sea! (Map Courtesy: Richard Robinson)

The competition at KXLR-AM was scared out of their wits, according to A. J. Lindsey, who later became the second “Doc Holiday” and later, “Emperor Holiday”...more about him later. They knew there were some heavy players coming to town and wondered about their immediate future. As A. J. mentioned once in an interview on Tony Warner’s *Timeless Tracks*: “...the later it became and the more we listened, the more we drank and the more scared we got!”

Shortly after coming on the air, KAAV voluntarily lent its services to the United States government. Due to its nighttime directional pattern, it blanketed Cuba, so the station broadcast Voice of America propaganda in the evening hours, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Other stations also lent their time as well, at the request of the government (see sidebar).

The original line-up started with an early-morning drive-time DJ known as “Doc Holiday” (who was actually Dub Murray, the first to use that moniker at KAAV) from 6 until 9 am; Mike McCormick (Jim Hankins) was mid-morning, 9 am to noon. Following that was the first Sonny Martin (Wayne Moss) until 3 pm. Buddy Carr (who was actually Tom Bigby and the station’s first music director) did the afternoon drive time show “Carpool Party” until 6 pm. There was a religious block from 6 - 8 pm, and then Rob Robbins (Tom Campbell) took over until midnight. From midnight to morning, Ken Knight (Howard Watson, a.k.a. “The Weird Beard,” reigned.

Also, unheard-of at the time, KAAV employed two newsmen, John K. Anderson and George J. Jennings. The first Manager was Tom Bishop, followed by Len Carl in 1964, who also later became the vice president of KAAV’s parent company, LIN Broadcasting; following him was Pat Walsh in 1966. Pat had previously been a salesman, but worked his way up to general manager.

There’s an interesting fact about the KAAV DJs’ names: they were the actual names of the LIN Broadcasting board of directors! These names were “recycled” as one DJ would leave and another came on. To keep listeners from becoming confused with differing voices, the last name of the departing DJ would go to the bottom of the list. As another DJ came on months later, they would be assigned the next name on the list. Listeners would think, “Hey so-and-so is back!” Later, Dale Seidenschwarz was given the name “Clyde Clifford,” the name of LIN’s comptroller, Dale still uses that name today.

By the way, “L-I-N” stood for the cities of



DJ Bill Edwards mans the KAAV “Funmobile” at a broadcast remote. (Courtesy: Bud Stacey)

Louisville, Kentucky, Indianapolis, Indiana and Nashville, Tennessee, markets in which they had stations. In a few instances, when a DJ again became employed by KAAV and their original air name was taken, they’d use their own name; one example was Wayne Moss, who was a “Sonny Martin,” but came back years later and used his own name.

A Varied Format

KAAV was not just rock-n-roll. It was a “split format” station. Their Top 40 format was driven mainly by listener feedback. There were farm reports and the aforementioned evening religious block. There was always some sort of content going on, most times, two at a time!

KAAV also broke the rules regarding normal news formats by having about a seven-minute segment at quarter to the hour (“First at 45!”). Later, this was also expanded to include headlines at quarter after the hour. In this way, KAAV scooped the competition, which normally broadcast the news at the top of the hour.

Later, in 1966, Beaker Street, the “underground music” program of KAAV began, breaking another barrier: long cuts of rock, blues and other music not normally heard anywhere else! Also, according to Jonnie King, a unique show, “The Breakfast Serial” (based on classic Golden Age Radio shows) began as a morning feature around 1971-72, with Sonny Martin and George Jennings. Jonnie created a new version of “The Breakfast Serial” in 1973, and this version has become a cult classic, having been in syndication since 1976 in many markets around the U.S. It continues today with its own website: www.serial.thewwbc.net.

Clyde Clifford was an engineer as well as a DJ, so he was able to broadcast the highly successful Beaker Street show from the transmitter site in Wrightsville, Arkansas, about twenty miles out of Little Rock. Clyde played weird background music under his voice to mask the noise of the transmitter’s cooling fans. He first used Henry Mancini’s music from the dream sequence of the movie *Charade*, then later *Cannabis Sativa* by Head for this purpose.

The length of the program varied, but eventually went from 11 pm until 2 am, when Beaker Theater, an hour-long mystery radio show, aired. After this “theater of the mind,” Clyde would return to regular programming until 6 am. Clyde left when Beaker Street was discontinued, but the show was resurrected at times with different DJs, such as Stuart McRae, Tom Roberts, Ken Knight and Don Payne,

TALES FROM THE KAAV TRANSMITTER SITE

KAAV used an RCA BTA-50F transmitter and was noted for their on-air sound, about which former engineer Dave Montgomery noted, “Much has been said about the ‘sound’ of KAAV. We worked very hard to get it right and keep it right. Chief engineer Felix McDonald, my boss, kept the transmitter in as good of shape as a new one, and every year at Proof of Performance time, the ol’ RCA-BTA50F gave us flat frequency response, low distortion, and a full measure of output at +100% modulation. What a sweetie she was!” Montgomery also noted, “The ceramic tube sockets are about the size of a toilet.”

The KAAV transmitter site, built on the location of a former hog farm, was itself legendary. It is said that there was a grave within the enclosed three tower array that accounted for several ghostly events and sightings. KAAV engineer, Dave Montgomery, shares just a little of the flavor of what it was like off-air and behind the scenes, back at the transmitter site:

“When we were installing the new ground system, we were working right at the base of the towers, which were very hot with RF. The two end towers, even de-tuned for daytime operation still had significant induced RF since they were only about 500ft away from the 50kW center tower! So the towers were a potential lethal shock hazard even though they were not being directly driven by the transmitter.

“To ‘safety’ the tower, there was a buried copper cable, about size ‘000’ that had a crook in the end. We would take the crook end and hang it off the bottom of the tower to insure it was properly grounded and then safe to work around. (It messed up the daytime pattern when we did this, since the tower would no longer be properly detuned, but that’s another story).

“On more than one hot summer afternoon, a typical thunderstorm would build in the distance and begin rumbling in. We wanted to work as long as we could, but we also wanted to be away from the towers when the lightning began to fly around. We didn’t keep a portable radio with us, but we did want to hear the weather forecast. Well, the weather forecast was always right after the news at the top of the hour, so we would watch the clock to know when the next weather forecast would be on the air.

“At the right moment, Felix [McDonald] would un-ground the tower and hold the crook of the grounding cable close enough to the tower base to draw a small arc. The flame of the arc was modulated RF, and we could plainly hear the weather forecast in the flame of the arc! Audio from fire!”

who was the very last DJ to air the program.

There were two deep-voiced announcers opening Beaker Street: Tom Perryman and later, Gary Gears. They had amazingly deep, rich voices. In fact, Pat Walsh utilized Tom many times over the years in advertisements and announcements of all types. Many describe Tom

KAAV Radio 1090
for the PEOPLE



Posters, bumper stickers and buttons are just a few gimmicks radio stations used to promote listener-ship. Most such items have short lives, but KAAV listeners saved

theirs for over 40 years. (Courtesy: Ron Henselman and Bud Stacey)

as being *the* voice of KAAV. Tom was never officially employed by KAAV, but was part of LIN Broadcasting in Louisville, Kentucky. The complete role of Gary Gears is unknown.

KAAV was involved in as many community events as possible. Jerry Sims, the second "Sonny Martin" from 1962 to 1967 volunteered to attend some of these events. Before a parade, he won a bet against A. J. "Emperor Holiday" Lindsey and so got to ride a flying saucer in the parade, with A. J. towing him. Jerry mentioned to me, "...the thing had to be towed because, due to the slope of the street, it kept drifting into the crowd!" This flying saucer was akin to riding a wheel-less round vehicle with a huge lawnmower engine driving an even bigger fan blade, raising it up over the street a couple of inches.

Another time, he broadcast from a sailboat at the entrance to the State Fair; Jerry also mentioned, "KAAV gave away so many goodies, the fair officials vowed to never again let them put it at the entrance!" These were only two of many events. Often KAAV took its "Funmobile," in its various incarnations, to do remote links back to the studio from the promotional events. I personally remember them broadcasting during "Toys for Tots" rallies over numerous years.

KAAV also had its own basketball team, called the "KAAV Kommandos" and they played all over the state, in support of charities. Their comedic nature even came forth on the court. A.J. and Charlie King, a later "Sonny Martin", also mentioned on *Timeless Tracks* that the Kommandos were "a poor-man's

Harlem Globetrotter team," and that they "stole all of their material – at least what we physically could do!" A.J. mentioned that Walt Sadler (Ron Owens) once grabbed the ball... and dribbled all the way down the court, yelling at the top of his lungs and went right out the door, into the parking lot!"

The RCA Transmitter

KAAV's transmitter was a tweaked and tuned monster on the airwaves! It was no wonder that they later called the station "The Mighty Ten-Ninety!" Chief Engineer Felix McDonald, Eddie Graham, Dave Montgomery and a host of other engineers lovingly tended this 50,000-watt "blowtorch" from RCA. Felix knew that transmitter like the back of his hand. He and his staff kept it in tip-top shape and made absolutely sure of its performance and also that of the audio chain and antenna system.

With this amount of power, clear-channel (not to be confused with the company by that name) stations had to be absolutely sure they didn't interfere with other stations on the same frequency – in this case, XERB to the west and WBAL to the east. To be sure, KAAV was heard all over this hemisphere, in 40 states and 29 countries!

Later, when KAAV was sold again (LIN originally sold to Multimedia, then to Citadel) to become a Christian station, on the last day of the rock-n-roll era, the old RCA transmitter was employed one last time and it sounded as if it never missed a beat. Clyde Clifford broadcast on the last hour of the last day with a one-hour

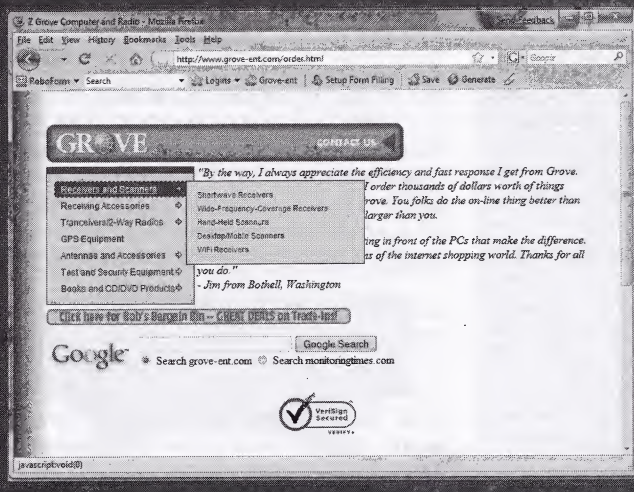


KAAV DJ Jerry Sims, known on-air as Sonny Martin, adrift in the USS Emperor Holiday atop an entrance to the Arkansas State Fair in 1963. Jerry Sims: "The appearance was a big hit and lots of fun. As always, we had our set of unforeseen problems. Hurriedly put together as it was, we did not have a sail. Some local ladies sewed together enough sheets to make a sail, and we painted the big KAAV on it. The sail helped cause our biggest problem. Ya see, the boat had to be built up on a wooden frame. I had a ladder to climb up into it in the rear. Then when the north wind came, the sail caught it enough to nearly blow boat and skinny DJ into an anxious crowd. Engineers quickly came out to cut holes in the sail. I later took down the sail when the wind blew so hard that the whole frame lifted in the rear. The whole promotion was a great success, so much so, that the Fair said 'Never again.' We kept the entire entrance stacked up." (Courtesy: Jerry Sims/Sonny Martin)

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Broadcasting U. S. political propaganda from Arkansas to Cuba

By Richard C. Robinson, Ph.D., University of Tennessee at Martin

In October 1962, the United States came close to nuclear war with the U.S.S.R. during what was called the “Cuban missile crisis.” President John F. Kennedy wanted the United States Information Agency (USIA) to get his message to Cuba in what became the first time in U.S. history that private commercial radio stations were utilized to carry propaganda programs for political purposes to a foreign country. Seven medium-wave commercial radio stations would broadcast during the crisis on Monday, October 22, 1962. One of those stations was KAAY in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Kennedy planned to address the nation and thought it vital that the Cuban people hear the position of the U.S. government. The problem facing the USIA was that the Voice of America (VOA) could reach Cuba only on shortwave frequencies, but 90% of Cubans did not own shortwave receivers. Both Donald M. Wilson, deputy director of the USIA, and VOA Director Henry Loomis knew that commercial AM 50,000-watt, clear-channel stations with north/south directional antenna patterns would be the only way to blanket the island with radio coverage.

Wilson wanted to request that the identified stations turn their facilities over to the U.S. government during the crisis so VOA programming could be heard in Cuba. Kennedy met with Wilson and the rest of his executive committee on Sunday, October 21, 1962 and approved the plan. The White House communications director arranged for direct, continuously open, telephone lines to the selected radio stations. The White House arranged for installation personnel from AT & T to go to the stations and install a line, without management’s knowledge, in secret.

By arrangement, President Kennedy’s press secretary, Pierre Salinger, called station managers beginning at six pm. Kennedy’s speech was to be delivered one hour later. Salinger told station executives this was a matter of national emergency and he was speaking on behalf of the President. When told telephone lines had been installed at each location, every manager agreed to cooperate and Loomis gave instructions on how to hook up. By seven o’clock, when President Kennedy began speaking, the stations turned off their programming and aired the Voice of America live. They continued to air this programming for four weeks. Since the federal government, which has regulatory control over broadcast radio stations, was demanding the use of their facilities, the participation of the privately owned stations had to be entirely voluntary.

KAAY’s Role

On the day after the Cuban missile crisis period began, KAAY program director James M. Hankins walked into the studios of the station around seven that morning. Jack Grady, a reporter for the station jumped out of the newsroom, holding an Associated Press release that had just come over the wire service to the station. Anderson said, “Look what’s going on!” The release stated that the government had gone to a number of radio stations, primarily on the east coast of the United States, and persuaded them to broadcast programming during the night in Spanish to the people of Cuba.

When Hankins read the release, his first thought was “Why in the hell didn’t they call us?” Hankins knew that KAAY, with its 50,000 watts, clear channel frequency and directional nighttime antenna, would reach Cuba easily. Hankins called the USIA in Washington, D.C. He spoke with Carl T. Rowan, the African-American journalist, who worked for the agency at that time. Rowan said there was no listing for KAAY. Hankins realized that the official’s station list had not been updated to reflect the new station. “They had made a mistake by thinking that KAAY (formerly KTHS) was off the air,” KAAY newsman George Jennings later recalled.

Hankins told Rowan, “We’re putting a signal across Havana like you wouldn’t believe.” Rowan replied that he would have a “class A line” to the station within 15 minutes. In those days, getting a telephone line of that quality installed in a radio station could take up to two weeks. Hankins tried to contact the president of LIN Broadcasting, the corporation that owned KAAY, but the company president was out of town and unavailable.

Jennings also recalled that Hankins almost got fired because he unilaterally made the decision to do it, without consulting management. On that occasion he had to appeal to the higher-ups, in order to keep his job, but he ultimately did lose it a year later. The episode nearly killed his career at the time. One of the KAAY disc jockeys, Wayne Moss, said, “He (Hankins) came up with the idea.” Disc jockey Tom Bigby recalls sitting in the studio on the evening of October 25, 1962. Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation came in and ordered him to leave. From outside, he began to hear programming in Spanish.

KAAY received newspaper coverage for its efforts during the crisis. The radio station also used their role in the Cuban missile crisis for promotional purposes. Announcements were generated and run on the station and other printed advertisements were distributed, designed to impress advertisers of the station’s coverage.

President John F. Kennedy honored station executives on December 4, 1962. KAAY’s manager was there to receive the award for the station. KAAY became the dominant radio station in Arkansas, and at night throughout the Western Hemisphere. But early in the station’s history, it played a key role during the Cuban missile crisis by carrying the American message to the Cuban people.

Beaker Street, not from the transmitter site, as before, but in the studio and, this time, someone else ran the control board for him.

The Last Day

David B. Treadway, the last “Doc Holiday” brought as many of the former DJs and others together for one last broadcast as the switch was made from rock and roll to Christian. This was an all-day affair, with memories shared and music played from the 1962 to 1985 era. One of my close friends, and a fellow Beaker Street fan, remembers tuning in after 11pm, settling down for the evening, when he heard Clyde sign off for the last time at midnight; then, he heard what he thought was country music, which was actually gospel music.

Many folks came and went at KAAY. It was said that manager Pat Walsh had a big heart and would take DJs back twice, even three or more times, but not if they went to another station in the Little Rock market.

There was something about KAAY: the folks there had loads of fun, there were no huge egos to battle and all were like family. DJs from later years, such as David B. Treadway, express their awe of the earlier DJs and even of his peers like Phil North and Jonnie King, among others. Being a listener, I was in awe of them too, but this insight shows the closeness of this unique station’s employees.

KAAY defined an era, not only in music, but also of breaking barriers and regularly accepted practices. More than once, a DJ would say something over the air and Pat Walsh would run down the hall, confirm what he heard, and then say, “Keep saying that!” He gave the DJs the freedom to be inventive.

I am honored to be associated with some of the greats of KAAY: Hot Scott Fisher, Jonnie King, Phil North, Jerry Sims, engineer Dave Montgomery, Tom Perryman, newsman Lee Frank, manager Dick Downes, Mark Larson, Don Payne, Bob Nelson, Jim Harvill and the late A.J. Lindsey, who passed away May 17, 2009. Others include Ron Henselman, Richard Robinson, John Shultz, Dave Schmidt, Bruce Murray, all of whom, together have begun a KAAY tribute blog after A.J. passed away, leaving his own blog dormant. You may log on at <http://mighty1090kaay.blogspot.com> to read more about KAAY’s history and hear airchecks (actual off-air recordings made by DJs and fans) and you’ll see lots more pictures as well! We occasionally link back to A.J.’s blog, where even more audio is stored.

Deep appreciation goes out to all of the above that helped and contributed, and for your friendships. KAAY will live long in many people’s hearts, for it was truly a historic station, which had a tremendous impact and was a socially significant radio station in its time.

Editor’s Note: Special thanks to former KAAY DJ Jonnie King (www.jonnieking.net) for allowing the use of his photos from that era. KAAY-AM is still on the air with 50 kW at 1090 kHz, broadcasting contemporary Christian music. The station is proud of its significant history and explains it all on their official web site: www.1090kaay.com.